

I took off about a liter of fluid from both sides. She felt wonderful for about three weeks, but then she told me, "Look, I've had it. Do . . . you . . . get it?"

I gave her Nembutal [pentobarbital sodium] suppositories and morphine but told her that I couldn't do what she wanted. I instructed her in how to relieve her pain. She and Milton would take it from there, she gasped to me.

I sobbed all the way home, thinking she was gone. I couldn't stand the loss. But the next morning I got a call from Milton. "She's gonna stick this out. She says she can't leave at this time of the year. Weather's too good. She could use some magic, though. Got any more of those cookies?"

I invited a magician friend to go to her home with me and my kids and my office nurses, and with Milton, we celebrated her birthday with a real magic show. Her birthday wouldn't be for another six months, but she wanted a party, so we gave her one. She laughed quietly and enjoyed the 30-minute respite from reality.

She lasted only a few more days. All of us went to her funeral. I had never seen my kids so upset. They spread her ashes in the Puget Sound. I closed the office for three days. I couldn't get out of bed.

Five years later, I still miss Gloria. Every time I hear the Christmas carol, I think of her and what a person she was. She enriched us so by her dignity and strength, by her ability to smile and to manage to find humor in unfunny things so as to cheer us up. When I hear that carol, it's as if she's calling me from heaven, showering me with her love and strength.

I hope I was a good doctor for her. I held her chart on my chest while I thought about all this and rocked in my chair. I did all that I could, but her dying left me with a question I still can't answer. She died at 34. Why do things like that happen? I put her chart into the deceased file and notice another wet handprint on it and new wet smudges where I'd written, "Gloria! Glooooooria!"

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Lessons From the Practice

Courage

ANONYMOUS

She is 27 years old and has had systemic lupus erythematosus for 12 years. She has suffered through pneumonitis, pericarditis, cerebritis, hepatitis, thrombocytopenia, and osteonecrosis of the hips and knees. She has had a knee replacement, plasmapheresis, a splenectomy, and surgical debridement of large soft tissue abscesses. She would always say that she was lucky because her kidney function was good. The only thing she wanted was a baby—she knew the risks, but was willing to take them.

She couldn't do many things, but she loved life; her smile lit up the world of those around her. With the enormous medical bills, her husband couldn't buy her many of the things she desired. But she still loved to shop for shoes, clothes, and jewelry. Her appearance was important to her. Despite the ravages of her disease, she took pride in the parts of her body that were beautiful and untouched—her hands, face, and breasts. She cared for her skin meticulously with moisturizers and lotions. She had beautiful, delicate hands and enjoyed having her nails manicured and polished.

In May, her feet became swollen. Her desire to buy fancy shoes went away. Her gratitude for good kidneys was lost, as tests confirmed membranous glomeru-

lonephropathy. The risk of pregnancy became insurmountable. But she moved on with her life.

In July, anasarca developed. The joy of buying new clothes went away as she went from size 4 to size 10. She would look in the mirror and cry. But she adjusted and went on with her life. In October, the distal third of the left index finger became necrotic and, later, had to be amputated. The joy went out of buying rings and jewelry; she no longer had her nails manicured and polished. Everyone said that it was no big deal—that it was the left hand, anyway. That didn't stop her tears. But she adjusted and went on with her life.

The nephrotic syndrome and diuretics caused large fluid shifts. These, in combination with high doses of steroids, caused the development of striae. Her beautiful breasts became edematous and marred with striae, and her abdomen became a map. Still, she did not give in to despair—she went on with her life.

Today she, my wife, had a wide smile as she returned from Nordstrom. "Honey," she said, "look at my two new handbags."

She goes on with her life.

(Anonymous: Courage. West J Med 1996; 165:86)